

Message Text

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S E C R E T DAMASCUS 3690

E.O. 11652: GDS
TAGS: PEPR, SY, US
SUBJECT: THE CONSPIRACY THEORY OF HISTORY: SYRIAN PERCEPTIONS OF THE
US ROLE IN LEBANON

1. SUMMARY: MINDEF TLASS IS THE HIGHEST OFFICIAL IN SOME
TIME TO ALLEGE THAT US IS PLOTTING AGAINST ARABS IN LEBANON,
BUT DOUBTS ABOUT US INTENTIONS ARE WIDESPREAD ON THE POPULAR
LEVEL. SYRIAN INTELLIGENCE OFFICIALS ARE ESPECIALLY
SUSPICIOUS OF US AND ARE CONVINCED THAT LEBNAESE CIVIL WAR
WAS PARTIALLY US INSTIGATED TO DISTRACT SYRIA FROM ITS
OPPOSITION TO SINAI II. FREQUENT US CONTACTS WITH RIGHTWING
CHRISTIAN LEADERS ARE CITED AS EVIDENCE OF US SYMPATHY FOR
THEIR VIEWS. NEITHER ASSAD NOR KHADDAM IN THEIR OFFICIAL EXCHANGES
WITH US HAVE EVER RAISED THESE CHARGES BUT EVEN ASSAD ON THE
EMOTIONAL LEVEL IS PRONE TO LINGERING SUSPICIONS ABOUT US MOTIVES,
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DESPITE HIS RECOGNITION THAT US HAS SUPPORTED SYRIA AT SEVERAL
CRITICAL JUNCTURES DURING ITS INVOLVEMENT IN LEBANON. END SUMMARY.

2. IN SPEECH TO SYRIAN ARMORED TROOPS ON JUNE 22, MINDEF
TLASS ACCUSED "SUSPECT GROUPS" IN LEBANON OF ATTEMPTING TO
IMPLEMENT "THE AMERICAN PLAN FOR DIVIDING LEBANON AND
CREATING WEAK ENTITIES TO CONSTITUTE A SECURITY BELT FOR

ISRAEL". TLASS IS OFTEN GIVEN TO INTEMPERATE RHETORIC. HIS ACCUSATION IS NOT WHOLLY NEW, AND IT WAS GIVEN VERY LITTLE PLAY BY THE SYRIAN PRESS. OCCASIONALLY SIMILAR CHARGES SLIP INTO LOCAL PRESS COMMENTARIES. (MOST RECENTLY IN FRONT PAGE TISHRIIN COLUMN BY EDITOR AMID AL-KHULI.)

3. ALTHOUGH TLASS IS THE FIRST SENIOR OFFICIAL TO RAISE THIS CANARD IN SOME TIME, A COMMON THEME IN SOME OF OUR CONVERSATIONS WITH POLITICALLY AWARE SYRIANS AND IN MEDIA COMMENTARY IS THAT US ROLE IN LEBANON IS MORE MACHIAVELLIAN THAN OUR PUBLIC STATEMENTS SUPPORTING SARKIS AND LEBANON'S UNITY AND TERRITORIAL INTEGRITY INDICATE.

4. THERE ARE SEVERAL REASONS FOR THIS. MANY SYRIANS ON AN EMOTIONAL LEVEL, PERHAPS EVEN MORE THAN MOST OTHER ARABS, ARE PRONE TO A CONSPIRACY THEORY OF HISTORY WHICH IS LITTLE AFFECTED BY OFFICIAL DENIALS, LOGIC, OR EVIDENCE THAT THE US HAS PLACED SEVERE RESTRICTIONS ON COVERT OPERATIONS. THEY PREFER TO BELIEVE THAT THE US AS A GREAT POWER ENGAGES IN THE TYPE OF ACTIVITIES ALLUDED TO IN MILES COPELAND'S "THE GAME OF NATIONS" (STILL FREQUENTLY QUOTED IN SYRIAN POLITICAL CIRCLES) AND OTHER BOOKS OF THAT GENRE. THEY ARE QUICK TO REMIND US OF US INTERFERENCE IN SYRIA'S INTERNAL AFFAIRS IN THE 1950'S AND 60'S.

5. SYRIANS WHO HAVE CONTACTS WITH SYRIAN INTELLIGENCE OFFICIALS CLAIM THAT MEMBERS OF THE STATE'S SECURITY ORGANS ARE
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EXTREMELY SUSPICIOUS OF THE US INTENTIONS IN LEBANON. CONTRIBUTING TO THEIR SUSPICIONS IS A DEEP-ROOTED BELIEF THAT DR. KISSINGER HELPED DESTABILIZE LEBANON IN ORDER TO DISTRACT AND PUNISH SYRIA AFTER ITS OPPOSITION TO SINAI II. THEY REASON THAT SYRIA'S CURRENT OPPOSITION TO SADAT HAS LEFT THEM OPEN TO A "RENEWAL" OF SUCH ACTIONS. SYRIAN MILITARY AND INTELLIGENCE OFFICIALS CITE AS EVIDENCE THE TIMING OF SECURITY INCIDENTS IN LEBANON SUCH AS THE FAYYADIYA CLASHES DURING SYRIA'S PRESIDENTIAL REFERENDUM ON FEBRUARY 8 AND THE FRANGIEH ASSASSINATION ON THE DAY OF ISRAEL'S WITHDRAWAL FROM SOUTH LEBANON. THEY REFUSE TO BELIEVE SUCH SELF-MULTILATING EVENTS ARE NOT PART OF A GRAND DESIGN.

6. FURTHER EVIDENCE OF US "DUPLICITY" IS GARNERED FROM US LINKS TO THE LEBANESE CHRISTIAN MILITIAS. A SYRIAN INTELLIGENCE OPERATIVE FOR MUHAMMAD NASSIF TOLD POLOFF THAT US FAVORED THE RIGHTISTS IN LEBANON, CITING FREQUENT CONTACTS THAT AMBASSADOR PARKER AND OTHERS FROM EMBASSY BEIRUT HAD WITH THEM. SUCH MISINTERPRETATIONS ARE OFTEN REINFORCED BY SYRIAN EXCHANGES WITH PLO OFFICIALS.

7. UNFORTUNATELY, THE SYRIANS ARE INFLUENCED IN THEIR VIEWS BY

THEIR OWN CULTURAL PERCEPTIONS. SYRIANS RESPECT CLEVERNESS AND A CLANDESTINE APPROACH. VENALITY IS VIRTUALLY UNIVERSAL. A SUPER-POWER, SUCH AS THE US WITH ALL THE PERCEIVED TOOLS AT ITS COMMAND, THEY REASON, MUST APPROACH LEBANON IN THE SAME VEIN. THUS, THEORIES ABOUT THAT THE US IS SUPPORTING ISRAEL IN CREATING REGIONAL STRIFE WITH A VIEW TOWARDS ESTABLISHING SECTARIAN STATELETS IN SYRIA AND LEBANON.

8. OTHER SYRIANS WHO DO NOT SHARE THE VIEW THAT THE US IS WORKING AGAINST SYRIA IN LEBANON BELIEVE THAT THE US COULD, IF IT WISHED, USE TRADE-OFFS IN LEBANON TO AFFECT SYRIA'S ATTITUDE TOWARD THE PEACE PROCESS. THEY SUGGEST THAT SYRIA'S TRADITIONAL CLAIMS ON LEBANON IF TACITLY ENCOURAGED BY THE US COULD SOFTEN SYRIA'S OPPOSITION ON SUCH QUESTIONS
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AS THE NATURE OF PEACE AND COMPLETE ISRAELI WITHDRAWAL FROM THE WEST BANK.

9. THE BOTTOM LINE, OF COURSE, IS ASSAD'S OWN PERCEPTION OF US POLICY IN LEBANON. NEITHER HE NOR KHADDAM HAVE EVER SUGGESTED TO US IN FORMAL DIPLOMATIC EXCHANGES THAT THEY SUSPECT CURRENT US POLICY IN LEBANON, ALTHOUGH SUCH SUSPICIONS HAVE CREPT INTO HIS CONVERSATIONS WITH OTHERS. ASSAD APPEARS TO OPERATE ON TWO LEVELS. INTELLECTUALLY, HE CAN UNDERSTAND AND APPRECIATE THAT THE US AT MANY CRITICAL JUNCTURES HAS BEEN SUPPORTIVE OF SYRIAN POLICY IN LEBANON, MOST RECENTLY IN HELPING TO PUSH THROUGH UNSC RES 425, SECURING ISRAEL'S WITHDRAWAL FROM LEBANON. (MFA) AMERICAN AFFAIRS DIRECTOR RECENTLY TOLD POLOFF THAT ONLY TWO COUNTRIES WERE WORKING FOR LEBANON'S STABILITY-- SYRIA AND THE US.) VISCERALLY, HOWEVER, HE REMAINS A SUSPICIOUS MAN CONVINCED THAT NUMEROUS DIVERSE EXTERNAL ENEMIES ARE PLOTTING TO WEAKEN SYRIA AND ENGINEER HIS DOWNFALL. WE HAVE HEARD THE REMAINS BITTER OVER THE NECESSITY OF WITHDRAWING SYRIAN TROOPS FROM NABATIYYA IN JANUARY 1977 UNDER ISRAELI PRESSURE, UNSURE THAT THIS AND MORE RECENTLY ISRAEL'S TURNOVER OF ITS POSITIONS IN SOUTH LEBANON TO RIGHTIST MILITIAS COULD HAVE OCCURRED WITHOUT US CONNIVANCE. HE IS APPARENTLY RECEPTIVE TO THE VIEW THAT DR. KISSINGER HAD A MAJOR ROLE IN ENGINEERING THE LEBANESE CIVIL WAR AND WHILE HE HAS EXPRESSED APPRECIATION OF THE CURRENT ADMINISTRATION'S CANDOR AND HONESTY, HE MAY HARBOR SUSPICIONS THAT US POLICY OPERATES ON SEVERAL LEVELS.

10. WE CAN PROBABLY NEVER DISPEL ASSAD'S DOUBTS COMPLETELY, REGARDLESS OF WHAT WE DO IN LEBANON. THEY ARE DAILY REAFFIRMED BY OUR SUPPORT FOR PRESIDENT SADAT'S "UNILATERAL" INITIATIVE. THESE LINGERING SUSPICIONS WILL REMAIN IN HIS MIND AND WITH MANY OF HIS ASSOCIATES AND ADVISORS AND INEVITABLY COMPLI-
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CATE FUTURE US ATTEMPTS TO ENGAGE SYRIA IN THE PEACE PROCESS.
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